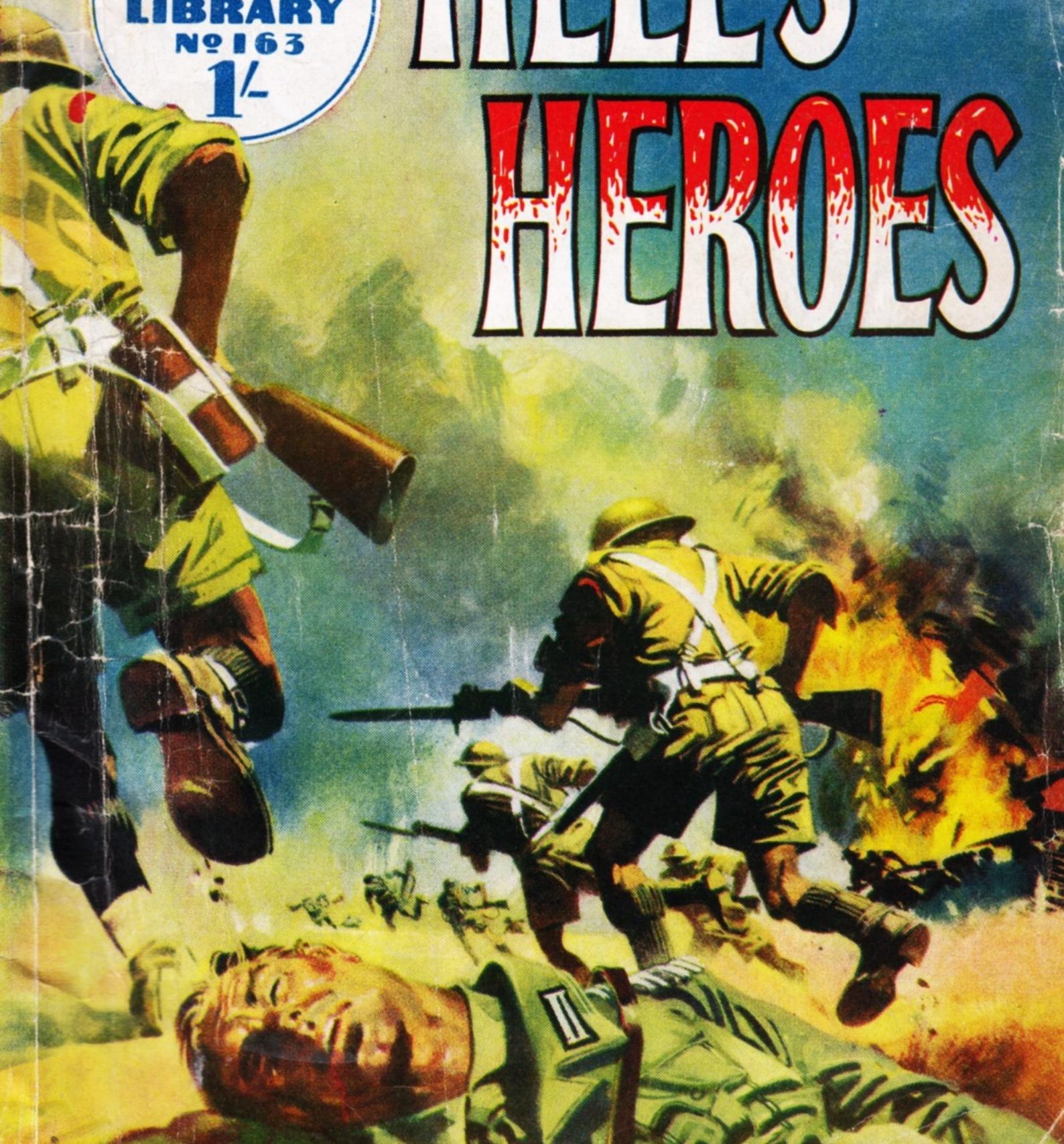
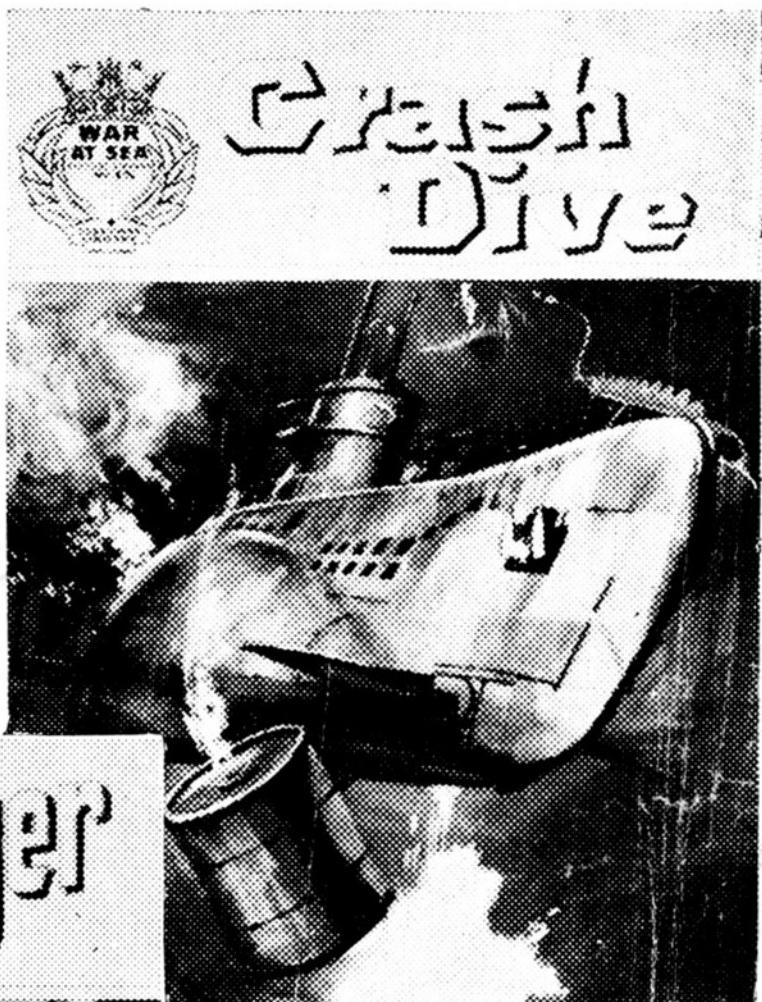


HELL'S HEROES



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HELL'S HEROES

HE WAS A HARD CASE, ROUGH, TOUGH AND HORNY-HANDED. HE SPOKE THE SAME LANGUAGE AS THE DIGGERS IN THE RANKS, WITH HIS TONGUE AND HIS FISTS. HE WAS A BORN LEADER OF MEN...



Chapter 1. Breakthrough

IN MAY 1942, THE PENDULUM OF THE WAR IN THE DESERT SWUNG BACK IN FAVOUR OF THE GERMANS. THE EIGHTH ARMY HAD OVER-REACHED ITSELF IN THE LAST ADVANCE TO GAZALA. NOW ROMMEL FORCED THEM TO RETREAT...



THE FOURTH BATTALION, 216TH QUEENSLAND MILITIA, AUSTRALIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE, WAS HOLDING A BOX SOUTH-EAST OF GAZALA WHEN THE AFRIKA KORPS STRUCK WITH TANKS AND INFANTRY AT DAWN...



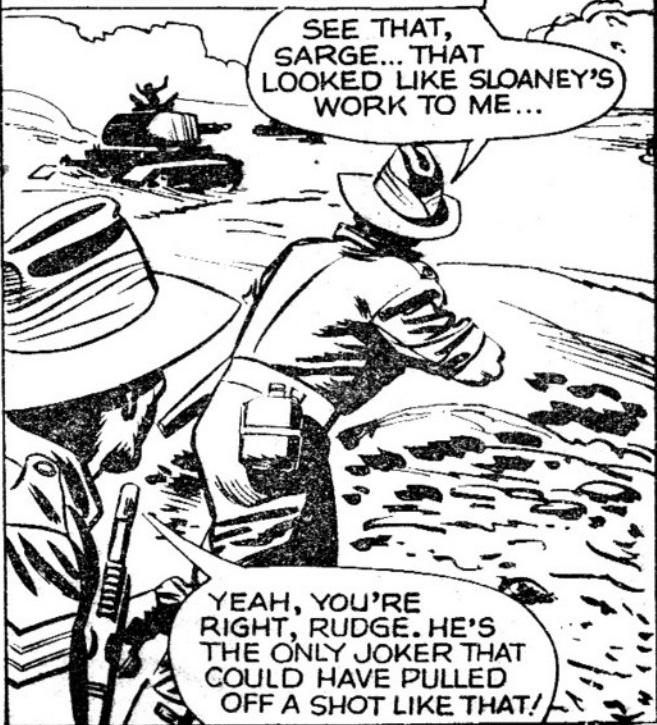
Hell's Heroes

5

BEHIND 'D' COMPANY'S WEAPON PITS, A BIG MAN IN A STAINED SHIRT CLIMBED OUT OF A COMMAND TRUCK. HE HOOKED HIS PISTOL INTO HIS CALLOUSED HAND...



SIX PLATOON'S BREN WAS HAMMERING FROM THE LEFT WING OF THE BOX AS THE BIG MAN HEADED TOWARDS THE GUN-PITS.



Hell's Heroes



MOST OF THE FOURTH BATTALION'S MILITIAMEN CAME FROM THE QUEENSLAND OUTBACK. THEY WERE A TOUGH LOT, NOT OVERFOND OF OFFICERS.

JERRY'S GOT INTO C COMPANY'S TRENCH, MEN... WE'LL HAVE TO FLUSH THEM OUT... FIX BAYONETS...

TALK SENSE, LOOT, THEY GOT A MARK THREE BLASTING DOWN THE PARAPETS THERE. WE'D NEVER MAKE IT ALIVE, AND DOOLEY AIN'T AIMING TO CROAK YET...



RUDGE WAS AN OFFICER, BUT RUDGE WAS DIFFERENT...

I HEARD THAT, DOOLEY. CHUCK YOUR BAYONET OVER. YOU WON'T BE NEEDING IT AFTER I'VE FINISHED DUSTING THE FLOOR WITH YOU...

I MIGHT HAVE KNOWN YOU'D TURN UP, RUDGE MATE... HAVE IT YOUR WAY. COME ON, BLOKES, FIX BAYONETS...



Hell's Heroes

CORPORAL DOOLEY WAS FIRST OUT OF THE TRENCH BESIDE RUDGE. THE YOUNG LIEUTENANT FOUND HIMSELF BESIDE THE BIG MAN'S DRIVER, SERGEANT TESTER.

THREE OF YOU
FIX THAT TANK.
THE REST STICK
WITH ME...

I WISH I COULD
HANDLE THE MEN
LIKE RUDGE DOES,
SERGEANT...

YEAH... WELL
YOU'D NEED BIG
HORNY HANDS,
LIEUTENANT, AND
A BIG HEART.

THE GERMANS HAD OCCUPIED 'C' COMPANY'S TRENCH IN PLATOON STRENGTH. THEY WERE JAMMED IN TOO TIGHTLY TO USE THEIR GUNS WHEN DOOLEY'S SECTION HIT THEM.

GET STUCK
IN, BLOKES!

AA-AGH!
TEUFEL!



Hell's Heroes

7

THREE MEN HAD CRAMMED GRENADES INTO THE TURRET OF THE MARK III. IT BREWED UP AS THE AUSSIES FLOODED INTO THE CROWDED TRENCH...



RUDGE HAD BEEN FIGHTING THIS WAY FOR THREE YEARS, SIDE BY SIDE WITH THE RANKERS IN THE HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT THAT CAME THEIR WAY.



RUDGE HAD BEEN A RANKER HIMSELF IN 'D' COMPANY AT ABBEVILLE IN 1940. HE HAD WON HIS FIRST STRIPES THERE...



Hell's Heroes

COLONEL MACK HAD GIVEN RUDGE HIS FIRST PIPS AFTER THE BATTALION HAD BEEN BLOODED IN THE DESERT WAR AT SIDI BARRANI IN DECEMBER OF 1940.

'TRANSPORT'S OKAY, RUDGE, IN CASE WE HAVE TO PULL OUT...'

'WE'LL HAVE TO PULL OUT ALL RIGHT, SARGE. IT'S JUST A MATTER OF TIME!'



COLONEL MACK, THE FOURTH'S COMMANDER, GREETED RUDGE WITH A SMILE...

IT'S NO USE, COLONEL. THE SIGNAL FROM BRIGADE H.Q. SAYS THE GERMANS ARE ALL AROUND US. WE HAVE NO CHOICE. THERE'S NO WAY OUT...

LET'S HEAR WHAT MAJOR RUDGE HAS TO SAY...



Hell's Heroes

9

RUDGE HAD BEEN THE COLONEL'S
RIGHT-HAND MAN SINCE HALFAYA
FIVE MONTHS BEFORE. THEY WERE
BOTH BORN SOLDIERS. THEY
UNDERSTOOD EACH OTHER...

WELL, MAJOR RUDGE? YOU'VE HEARD THE FACTS...

LOOK, PYM - WE'VE GOT THE TRUCKS AND THE MEN TO PUNCH THEM THROUGH THE JERRIES. NO-ONE'S GOING TO BOTTLE UP THE FOURTH WHILE I'M AROUND...



COLONEL MACK SMILED AT THE BIG MAN.
HE WAS STILL TALKING WHEN THE WHINE
OF THE AERO ENGINES DROWNED HIS
VOICE...

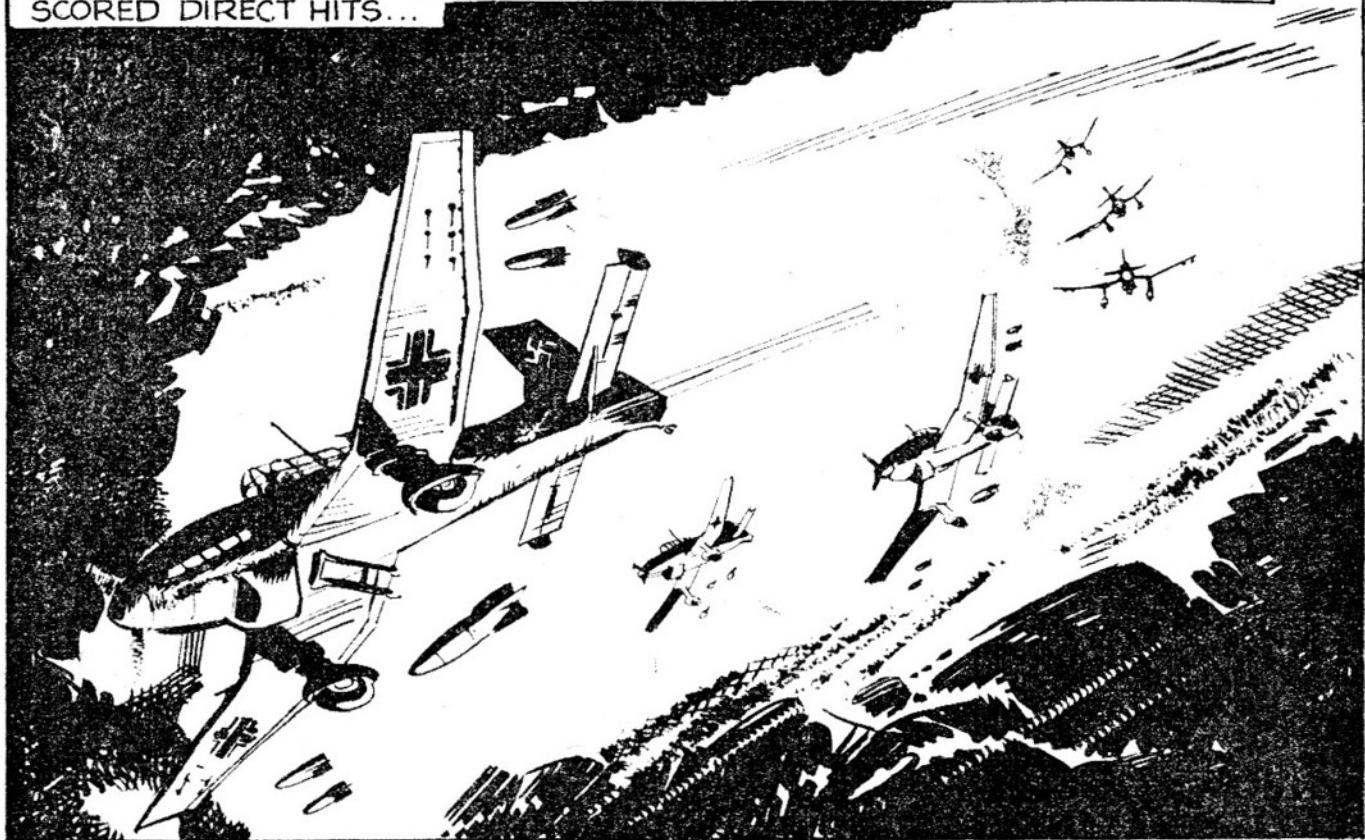
MY SENTIMENTS EXACTLY, RUDGE. ALL RIGHT, GENTLEMEN, LET US ADMIT THAT THE FOURTH IS SURROUNDED BY A RING OF GERMAN STEEL...

SIR-STUKAS!



Hell's Heroes

SIX JUNKERS EIGHTY-SEvens CAME DOWN IN A VICIOUS STEEP DIVE, THEIR BOMBS BURSTING AS THEY FLATTENED OUT ABOVE THE H.Q. TWO OF THEM SCORED DIRECT HITS...



THE SHATTERED H.Q. DUG-OUT WAS FULL OF SMOKE AND DUST. THE COLONEL SLUMPED AGAINST RUDGE, A DEADWEIGHT...



THE TRUCK-MOUNTED BRENS WERE HAMMERING AT THE WHEELING PLANES AS THE OFFICERS STUMBLED OUT OF THE WRECKED DUG-OUT...

LET'S GET HIM TO THE CLEARING STATION, RUDGE!

NO—
LISTEN,
RUDGE—THERE
ISN'T MUCH
TIME—

THAT WAS HOW RUDGE GOT HIS COMMAND—FROM THE LIPS OF A DYING MAN IN THE MIDDLE OF A STRAFING...

THE BATTALION...
IT'S YOURS, RUDGE.
I'M HANDING OVER
COMMAND TO YOU.
YOU HEAR ME...
COLONEL RUDGE!

I'LL SEE
THEM THROUGH.





FIVE MILES AWAY ACROSS THE BLACK SAND,
THE GERMAN ARMOURED RING HAD BEEN
CLAMPED SHUT AROUND THE AUSTRALIANS.
THE ENEMY OFFICERS YAWNED COMPLACENTLY...

AT DAWN WE WILL MOVE IN
AND MOP THEM UP, MAJOR.
I DO NOT ANTICIPATE ANY
UNDUE TROUBLE. NOW I WILL
GET SOME SLEEP...

YOU HAVE
EARNED YOUR
REST, HERR
OBERST!

ACH!
WAS IS
DAS?



THE TRUCKS OF THE FOURTH HIT
THE GERMAN LINES AT FIFTY
MILES AN HOUR. THEIR BRENS
AND LEWIS GUNS WERE
BLAZING, AND THE
HOT DARKNESS
FANNED BACK FROM
THEIR MUZZLES...

ZUM
TEUFEL!

BASH ON!
BASH ON!

AAGH!





SUDDENLY, THE FIGHTING AND THE DYING WAS BEHIND THEM, AND THE TRUCKS OF THE FOURTH RAN FREE IN THE WINDY DARKNESS OF THE DESERT...

OKAY, BLOKES.
KEEP GOING.
CRUISING SPEED...

I'LL RADIO BRIGADE
WHEN WE BIVOUAC, COLONEL.
THEY'LL WANT TO KNOW
ABOUT OUR BREAKOUT
AND OUR CHANGE OF
COMMAND...

ACTING-COLONEL RUDGE
HAD WON HIS FIRST
BATTLE. BUT HE HAD A
LOT OF FIGHTING AHEAD
OF HIM...

BEGINNERS
LUCK ... EH,
GORDON?

GIVE RUDGE A CHANCE,
CAPTAIN. MAYBE YOU'LL
THANK YOUR STARS YOU'VE
GOT A COLONEL LIKE HIM
BEFORE THIS DESERT
BATTLE TURNS OUR WAY AGAIN...

WE'LL LEAGUER
HERE, MEN...
I RECKON YOU'VE
EARNED YOURSELVES
A KIP...



Chapter 2. Relieved of Command

WITH ITS GAZALA LINE TORN OPEN BY ROMMEL'S COUNTER-ATTACK, THE EIGHTH ARMY FELL BACK, DRIVING TOWARDS THE FRONT. DAYS LATER, BRIGADIER DWYER PASSED A LONG LINE OF SANDCAKED GUN QUADS HEADING EAST...

THINGS LOOK PRETTY DODGY, SIR, DON'T YOU THINK?

UNCERTAIN IS THE WORD, CHALMERS. THE GERMAN ADVANCE DOES NOT WARRANT YOUR JETTISONING THE KING'S ENGLISH!

A DEFENSIVE SCREEN HAD BEEN THROWN AROUND TOBRUK ON THE ACROMA-EL ADAM LINE. BRIGADIER DWYER FOUND THE UNIT HE WAS LOOKING FOR IN THAT AREA.



Hell's Heroes

AFTER ESCAPING THE NET AT GAZALA, THE SHRUNKEN FOURTH HAD BEEN ATTACHED TO DWYER'S BRIGADE. HE HAD DECIDED TO INSPECT THE BATTALION AND ITS NEW COMMANDER PERSONALLY...

CARRY ON, CHALMERS. I'LL HAVE A WORD WITH THESE FELLOWS BEFORE I MEET THIS COLONEL RUDGE. ONE CAN LEARN A LOT ABOUT A COMMANDER FROM THE WAY HIS RANKERS BEHAVE...

VERY TRUE, SIR.



THERE WERE A DOZEN DIGGERS SQUATTING ON THE SAND IN THE SHADE OF A BIVVY-SHEET. THEY WERE PLAYING CARDS. THE BIGGEST OF THEM GLANCED CASUALLY AT THE BRIGADIER...

GOOD AFTERNOON, MEN. BATTALION HEADQUARTERS IS OVER THERE, IS IT?

ARE YOU ASKING OR TELLING US, COBBER?

COME ON, RUDGE, DEAL...



THE BIG MAN GOT UP LAZILY,
DUSTING THE SAND OFF HIS
PANTS. THE BRIGADIER
BRISTLED ANGRILY...

RANK INSUBORDINATION!
YOUR COLONEL SHALL HEAR
ABOUT THIS...

HE KNOWS
ALREADY, BRIG.
THE NAME'S
RUDGE...



BRIGADIER DWYER WAS AN EX-GUARDSMAN,
A STICKLER FOR DISCIPLINE. HE LOOKED AT
THE CROWN ON RUDGE'S STAINED SHIRT AND
HIS EYES WIDENED...

YOU'RE RUDGE—
GREAT SCOTT, MAN!

THE RED TAB'S
BREWING UP,
DOOLEY!

RUDGE CAN
HANDLE HIM. GIVE
ME A C.O. WHO TREATS
THE BRASS LIKE HE
TREATS HIS MEN, NO
BETTER NO WORSE...



Hell's Heroes

RUDGE WALKED
BESIDE THE
BRIGADIER. THE
GERMANS WERE
BEGINNING THEIR
NOON BARRAGE
OVER THE RIDGE.
RUDGE IGNORED
THE FIRST SHELL-
BURST...

IT'S NO GOOD
FOR DISCIPLINE TO
FRATERNISE WITH
YOUR MEN, RUDGE.

TO HELL WITH
DISCIPLINE, BRIG.
THAT'S NOT THE WAY
WE FIGHT IN THIS OUTFIT.
I RELAX WITH MY MEN,
AND I FIGHT RIGHT
ALONGSIDE 'EM,
TOO!

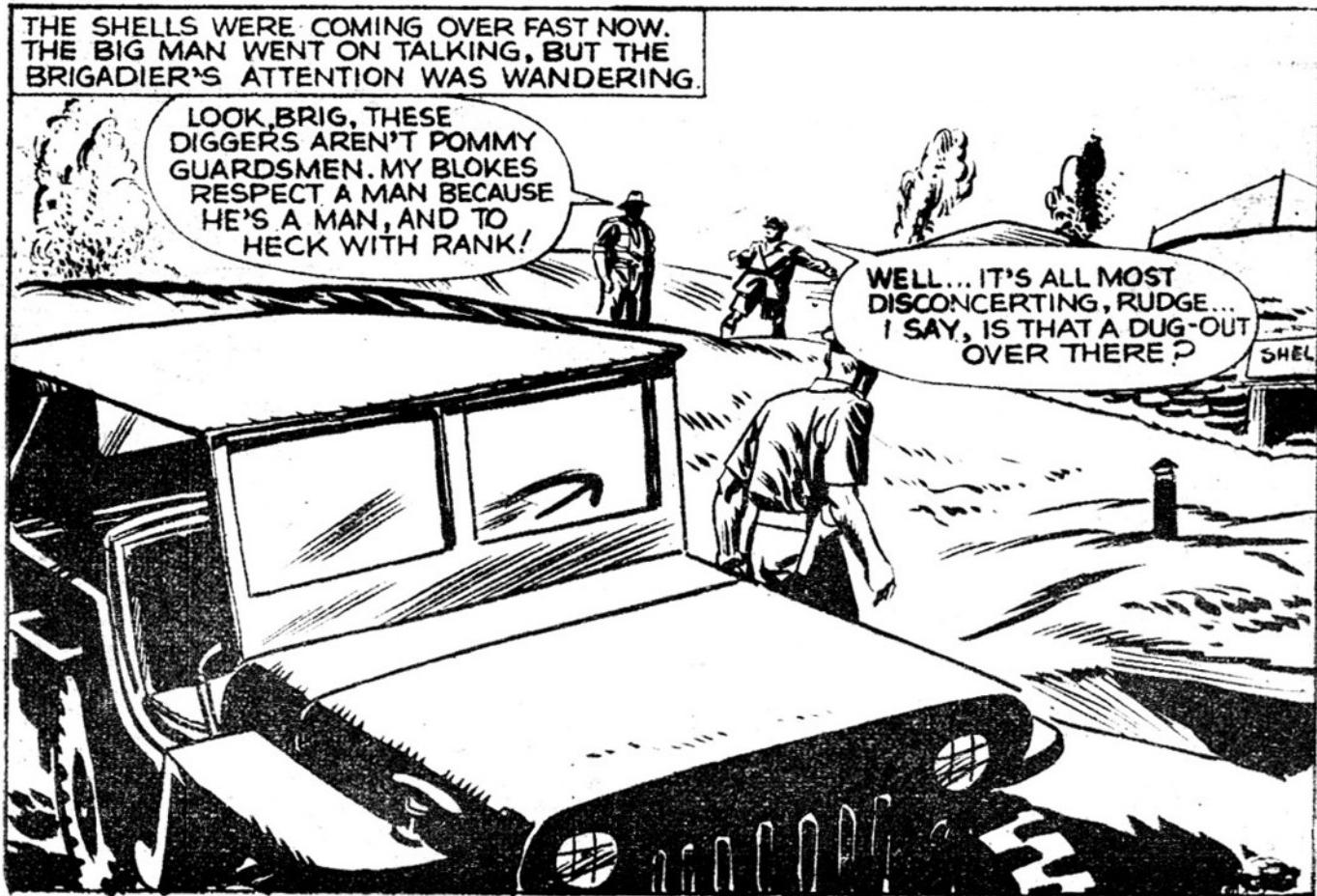


THE SHELLS WERE COMING OVER FAST NOW.
THE BIG MAN WENT ON TALKING, BUT THE
BRIGADIER'S ATTENTION WAS WANDERING.

LOOK, BRIG, THESE
DIGGERS AREN'T POMMY
GUARDSMEN. MY BLOKES
RESPECT A MAN BECAUSE
HE'S A MAN, AND TO
HECK WITH RANK!

WELL... IT'S ALL MOST
DISCONCERTING, RUDGE...
I SAY, IS THAT A DUG-OUT
OVER THERE?

SHEL



RUDGE TIPPED HIS SLOUCH HAT AGAINST THE BLAST BLOWN SAND, AND GRINNED...

SURE IT'S A DUG-OUT, BRIG. AND IT'S ALL YOURS. WE DON'T USE 'EM IN THIS OUTFIT...

THE GERMANS ARE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THAT RIDGE, I'M TOLD, SIR. DASHED UNHEALTHY SPOT, THIS!



BRIGADIER DWYER HASTENED TOWARDS THE DUG-OUT. HIS VISIT TO THE FOURTH WAS PROVING A THOROUGHLY DISTURBING EXPERIENCE...

WHO WAS THAT ROUGHNECK, SIR?

YOU'RE RIGHT, CHALMERS, HE IS A ROUGHNECK, HE IS ALSO ACTING - COLONEL RUDGE, COMMANDING OFFICER OF THE FOURTH BATTALION.



AT LEAST ONE OF RUDGE'S OFFICERS DID NOT SHARE HIS UNCONVENTIONAL VIEWS, THE BRIGADIER NOTICED AS HE DIVED INTO THE DUG-OUT...

AH... CAPTAIN... I'VE JUST BEEN TALKING TO YOUR COMMANDING OFFICER...

THAT MUST HAVE BEEN AN ILLUMINATING EXPERIENCE, SIR!





MEANWHILE, THE AFRIKA KORPS, PRESSING ON TOWARDS TOBRUK, WERE BRINGING UP ARMOUR AND ARTILLERY TO BREAK THE THIN ALLIED SCREEN ALONG THE ACROMA-EL ADEM LINE.

ACHTUNG...
PANZER THREE...
IN POSITION ON
START LINE...



BEYOND THE RIDGE, THE FOURTH STOOD BY FOR THE INEVITABLE ATTACK. THE DAY AFTER BRIGADIER DWYER'S VISIT OF INSPECTION, TWO SIGNALS REACHED BATTALION HEADQUARTERS...

BRIGADE'S
SENT OUR ORDERS,
COLONEL... AND THERE'S
A SECOND SIGNAL
FOR YOU...

OKAY, PYM...
CHUCK IT OVER...
AND GIVE ME THE
GIST OF THE
ORDERS...



Hell's Heroes

THE CAPTAIN TALKED WHILE RUDGE READ HIS SIGNAL. THE BIG MAN'S FACE SUDDENLY BECAME DARK WITH ANGER...

WE'RE TO MOVE FORWARD TO THE RIDGE WITH A BRIGADE GROUP, SIR... ACTING WITH THE GUNNERS...

YEAH...



THE SHELLING STARTED AGAIN THEN. RUDGE CRUMPLED THE SIGNAL BETWEEN HIS BIG HANDS. HE DROPPED IT ON THE SAND, AND GROUND HIS HEEL ON IT. SERGEANT TESTER WATCHED HIM...

YEAH... IF I KNOW JERRY, HE'LL PUT IN AN ATTACK AT DUSK... WE'D BETTER GET ORGANISED...

ANYTHING WRONG, RUDGE?



SERGEANT TESTER PICKED UP THAT CRUMPLED SIGNAL. HE READ IT TO THE MEN OF 'D' COMPANY AS THEY MOVED UP TO THE RIDGE IN TRUCKS AN HOUR LATER.

SAY THAT AGAIN, SARGE. I DON'T BELIEVE IT...

IT STICKS IN MY GULLET, TOO. THAT POT-BELLIED, STIFF-NECKED BRIGADIER... HE'S RELIEVING THE COLONEL OF HIS COMMAND... HE'S SACKED RUDGE!



THE FOURTH TOOK UP ITS POSITION ON THE RIDGE SULLENLY. THEIR COMMANDER'S VOICE WAS HARSHER THAN USUAL...

OKAY, SHAKE OUT...
GUNS IN THE CENTRE...
ANTI-TANK AND M.G.s ON
THE FLANKS. DIG IN DEEP,
YOU LOT AIN'T GOING
NOWHERE!



TEN MINUTES LATER, THE GERMAN TANKS MOVED UP THROUGH THE SMOKE LAID BY THEIR ARTILLERY. THE BRITISH GUNS OPENED FIRE FROM THE RIDGE. THE ONE-SIDED BATTLE HAD BEGUN... [A]

RAPID FIRE!

FORWARD!



AFTER THAT, THERE WAS NO TIME TO THINK OF THE BRIGADIER'S SIGNAL. THE FOURTH AND ITS COMMANDER WERE FIGHTING FOR THEIR LIVES...



THE MARK IVs HALTED HULL DOWN BELOW THE RIDGE, HOsing THE AUSTRALIAN GUN POSITIONS WITH CANNONS AND MACHINE-GUNS. THEY BROKE THROUGH IN THE CENTRE HALF-AN-HOUR LATER.



Hell's Heroes

27

RUDGE FOUGHT SHOULDER-TO-SHOULDER WITH HIS MEN IN THE NEXT FORTY MINUTES, AS THE GERMAN TANKS THRESHED INTO THE AUSTRALIAN POSITIONS AND TRIED TO SMASH THEM WITH POINT-BLANK FIRE ...



Hell's Heroes

THE GROUP HELD. WHEN THE STAFF CAR PULLED UP WITH SQUEALING BRAKES BELOW THE REVERSE SLOPE OF THE RIDGE, THE SURVIVING GERMAN TANKS WERE WITHDRAWING...



RUDGE WAS STANDING IN THE BROODING SILENCE WHEN LIEUTENANT COLONEL BALCHIN FOUND HIM.

GOOD AFTERNOON, COLONEL RUDGE. MY NAME IS BALCHIN. I'VE COME TO TAKE OVER COMMAND OF THE FOURTH FROM YOU.

BALCHIN WAS A STRAIGHT-BACKED ANGLO-AUSTRALIAN, WITH A CLIPPED MOUSTACHE AND A THIN DRY VOICE. RUDGE CLENCHED HIS FISTS, LOOKING AT HIM...

YOU'RE CRAZY, MATE! WE'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF A FIGHT. YOU CAN'T TAKE OVER FROM ME NOW!

THOSE ARE MY ORDERS, COLONEL. BRIGADIER DWYER WAS QUITE CLEAR ON THAT POINT.



RUDGE LOOKED AWAY. THE GERMAN TANKS WERE THRUSTING BACK TOWARDS THE RIDGE AND MEN OF THE FOURTH WERE DYING AGAIN, BUT BALCHIN'S VOICE WAS UNMOVED...

THE BRIGADIER'S ORDERS ARE FOR YOU TO RELINQUISH COMMAND AND RETURN TO HEADQUARTERS IMMEDIATELY, COLONEL RUDGE. THE CAR IS WAITING FOR YOU.

HECK!



RUDGE WALKED AWAY SAVAGELY...

OKAY! IF THAT'S THE WAY HE WANTS IT...

DON'T WORRY, RUDGE. I'LL PULL YOUR MEN THROUGH. ALL THEY NEED IS A FIRM HAND ON THE REINS.



A SPASM OF ANGER SHOOK RUDGE. THE MEN NEAR HIM THOUGHT HE WOULD SMASH HIS BIG CLENCHED FISTS INTO BALCHIN'S FACE. BUT HE WALKED AWAY. HE DID NOT LOOK BACK...

FACE YOUR FRONT, COBBERS - THAT'S WHERE THE ENEMY IS!

POOR OLD RUDGE!

YEAH, SARGE? ARE YOU SURE HE'S NOT DOWN THERE JUST READY TO TAKE OVER THE BATTALION?



Chapter 3. Retreat

THE FIRST ORDER LIEUTENANT COLONEL BALCHIN GAVE TO THE FOURTH BATTALION, ON THE SHELL-TORN RIDGE THAT DAY AN HOUR AFTER HE HAD RELIEVED RUDGE, WAS AN UNFORTUNATE ONE ...



THE FOURTH OBEYED THE ORDER SULLENLY, DISENGAGING FROM THE GERMAN TANKS, LEAVING THEIR DEAD BEHIND THEM.

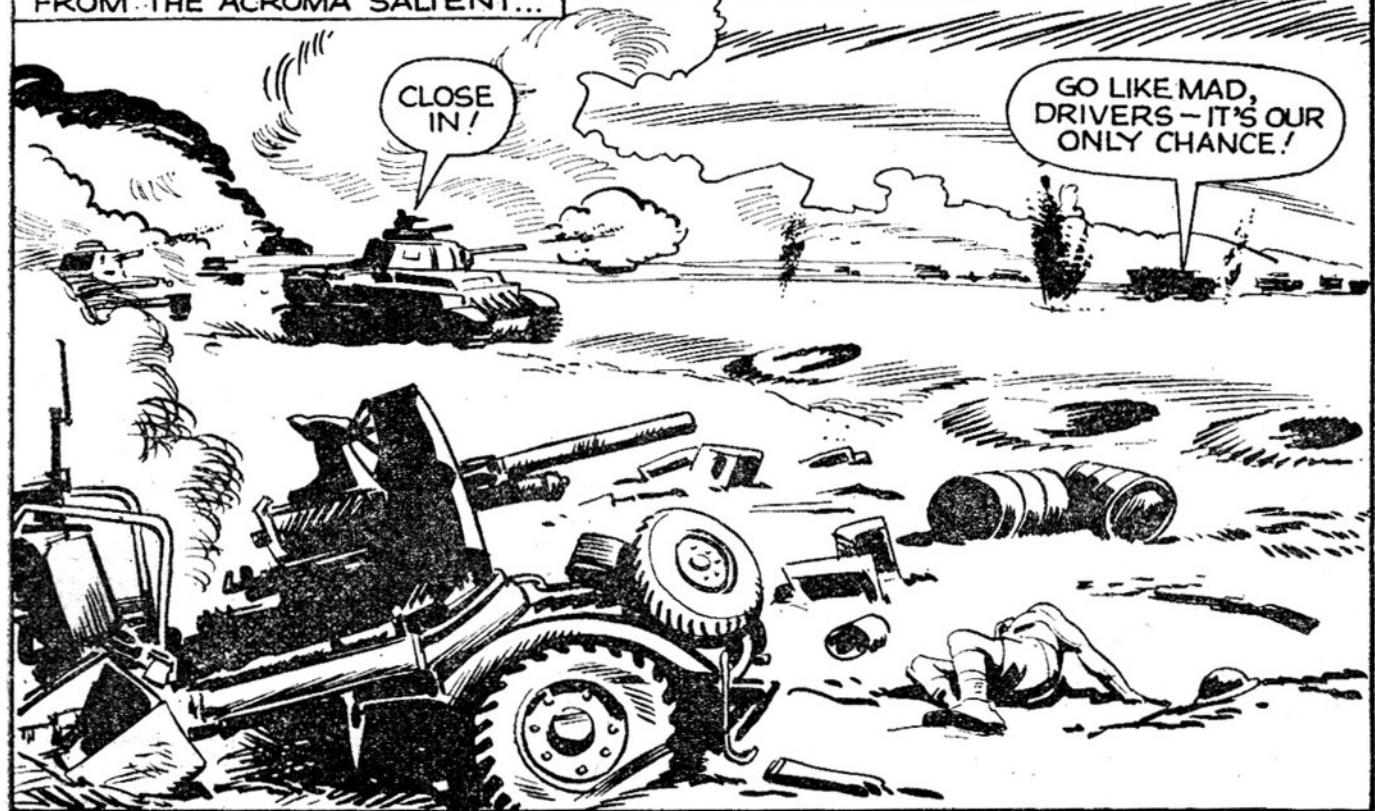
GET ABOARD
THE TRUCKS, MEN!
SNAP TO IT,
CHOP, CHOP!

AH,
GET
LOST!

YOU'D THINK
THE SO-AND-SO
ENJOYED TELLING
US TO RUN
AWAY...



THAT FIRST ORDER WAS HARDLY BALCHIN'S FAULT.
THE WHOLE OF THE EIGHTH ARMY, ITS LINES TURNED AGAIN
BY ROMMEL'S FAST-MOVING PANZERS, WAS PULLING BACK
FROM THE ACROMA SALIENT...



ON THE 20TH JUNE,
TOBRUK FELL. TWENTY
FIVE THOUSAND MEN
WERE TRAPPED AND
CAPTURED IN THE
GUTTED PORT BY THE
ADVANCING AFRIKA
KORPS. ONLY A
HANDFUL MADE THEIR
ESCAPE...



BRIGADE PULLED THE FOURTH BATTALION BACK SIXTY MILES TO THE EGYPTIAN FRONTIER SOUTH OF SIDI OMAN. LIEUTENANT COLONEL BALCHIN GAVE THE DIRECT ORDERS...

THIS WILL DO, CAPTAIN.
WE SHALL LEAGUER HERE.
OUT OF THE TRUCKS,
MEN! JUMP TO IT!

WHY DOESN'T
HE BELT UP...



THE ORDERS BALCHIN GAVE HAD COME FROM A HIGHER AUTHORITY, BUT AS HE PASSED THEM ON, HIS MANNER WAS SHARP AND ARROGANT

WE MOVE AT DAWN,
CAPTAIN. GET THE MEN
ON THEIR FEET. NO SKULKING!

TO BLAZES
WITH HIM!



THE AUSSIES OBEYED, BUT SIX DAYS OF CONSTANT RETREAT HAD ANGERED THEM. AND THEY HAD ANOTHER CAUSE FOR THEIR SULLENNESS...



THAT MORNING, LIEUTENANT COLONEL BALCHIN DECIDED TO GIVE THE BATTALION A PEP TALK.

BUT, SIR...
WE CAN'T STOP HERE.
IT'LL BE CLEAR DAY-LIGHT IN A FEW
MINUTES AND THE JERRIES ARE RIGHT
BEHIND US!

I HAVE GIVEN MY ORDERS, CAPTAIN.
I WANT ALL THE MEN TO HEAR WHAT I HAVE TO SAY.
THEIR MORALE NEEDS STIFFENING.

THE FOURTH FELL IN REBELLIOUSLY, LIEUTENANT-COLONEL BALCHIN STOOD, STRAIGHT-BACKED, TO ADDRESS THEM ...

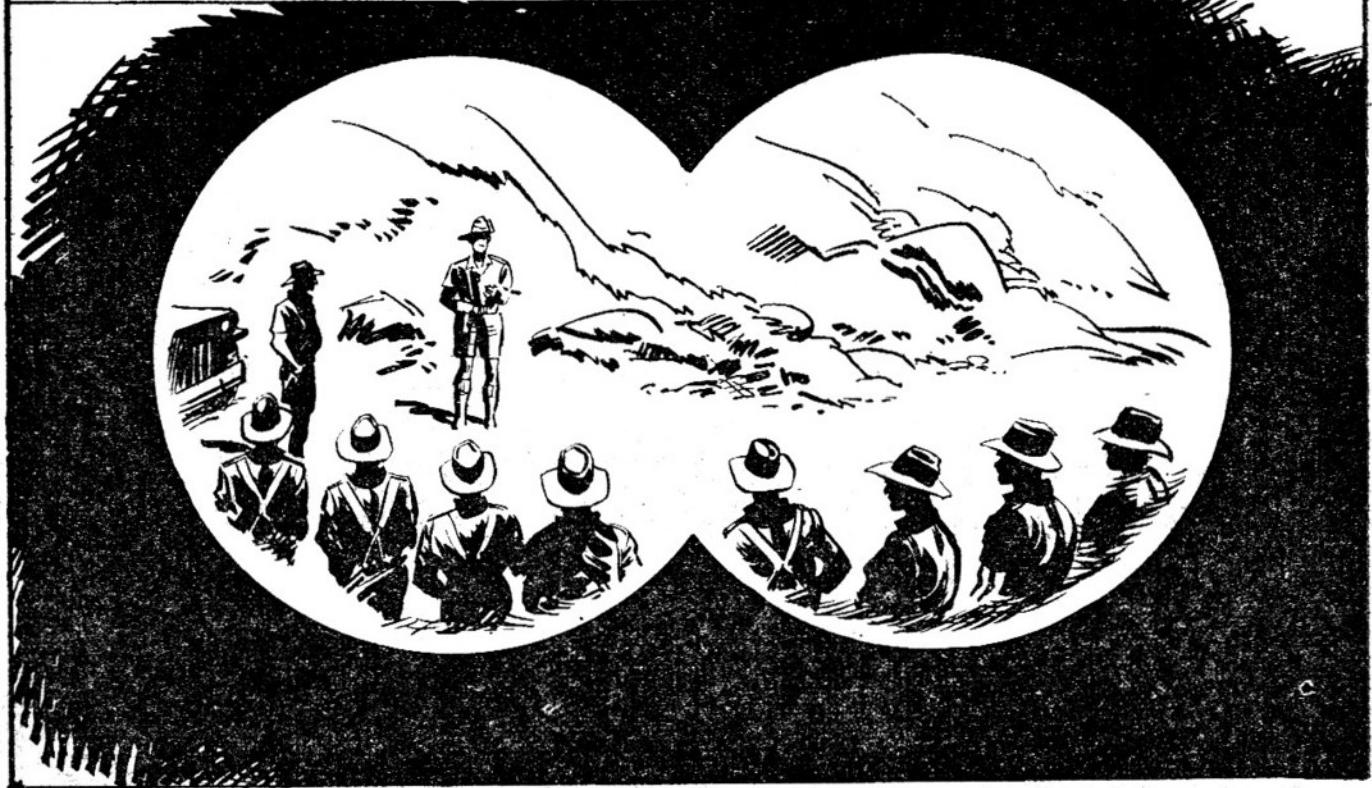
GET IN LINE THERE, MEN. SILENCE FOR THE COLONEL...

I'VE PUT UP WITH A GREAT DEAL OF INSUBORDINATION DURING THE LAST SIX DAYS, MEN. THAT'S GOING TO STOP HERE AND NOW!



Hell's Heroes

BALCHIN WAS STILL TALKING CRISPLY WHEN THE SUN CAME UP. HE WAS CLEARLY VISIBLE THROUGH BINOCULARS FROM THE TOP OF A RIDGE THREE HUNDRED YARDS AWAY...



THE BINOCULARS BELONGED TO THE YOUNG GERMAN LEUTNANT IN CHARGE OF AN ADVANCE PATROL OF THE 21ST PANZER DIVISION.

AND YOU WILL OBEY ORDERS WITHOUT QUESTION, I DO NOT INTEND TO TOLERATE SLACKNESS. I INSIST ON HAVING DISCIPLINE...

ONE SPANDAU HERE... QUIETLY...



DRAWN UP IN SOLID RANKS, WITHOUT ARMS AND WITHOUT PICKETS, THE FOURTH LISTENED TO THE CLIPPED VOICE OF THEIR NEW COMMANDER...

WHAT YOU CHAPS NEED TO STEADY YOU IS DISCIPLINE. ONLY BY STRICT OBEDIENCE TO YOUR SUPERIORS CAN YOU HOPE TO SURVIVE...



SUDDENLY, THE HARSH RATTLE OF SPANDAU CUT ACROSS BALCHIN'S VOICE. BULLETS ADDED A LEADEN FULL STOP TO HIS WORDS...

MY OATH! AMBUSHED!

YEAH - THAT'S WHAT DISCIPLINE DOES FOR YOU!



Hell's Heroes



Hell's Heroes

37

THE SPANDAUS WERE TRaversing THE LEAGUER NOW, BUT THE ORDERS OF THEIR COMMANDER WERE MORE BITTER TO THE MEN OF THE FOURTH THAN THE GERMAN BULLETS...

ON THE TRUCKS,
MEN. WE'RE NOT
FIGHTING-COLONEL'S
ORDERS!

WITHDRAW!

HECK! IF OLD
RUDGE HAD BEEN
HERE IT WOULD
HAVE BEEN A
DIFFERENT
STORY.

THE YOUNG GERMAN LEUTNANT HAD EXPECTED A COUNTER-ATTACK. INSTEAD, THEY FACED ONLY WEAK AND BADLY-AIMED FIRE FROM THE BRENS AS THE TRUCKS LURCHED AWAY...

THE ENEMY RUNS,
HERR LEUTNANT...

WE HAVE ROUTED
A BATTALION WITH
TWO GUNS AND FORTY
MEN. THE BRITISHERS
MUST BE BEATEN!

Hell's Heroes

THAT WITHDRAWAL, INSTEAD OF A SHARP ATTACK TO CLEAR THE RIDGE, COST THE BATTALION AT LEAST FOUR TRUCKS AND EIGHTY MEN. IT DID NOT STOP LIEUTENANT-COLONEL BALCHIN'S ORDERS...

HEAD DUE WEST,
DRIVERS! KEEP
GOING!

GOOD MEN KILLED
BECAUSE BALCHIN
WOULDN'T FIGHT...
WHY COULDN'T JERRY
PUT A BULLET IN
THAT LOUDMOUTH!

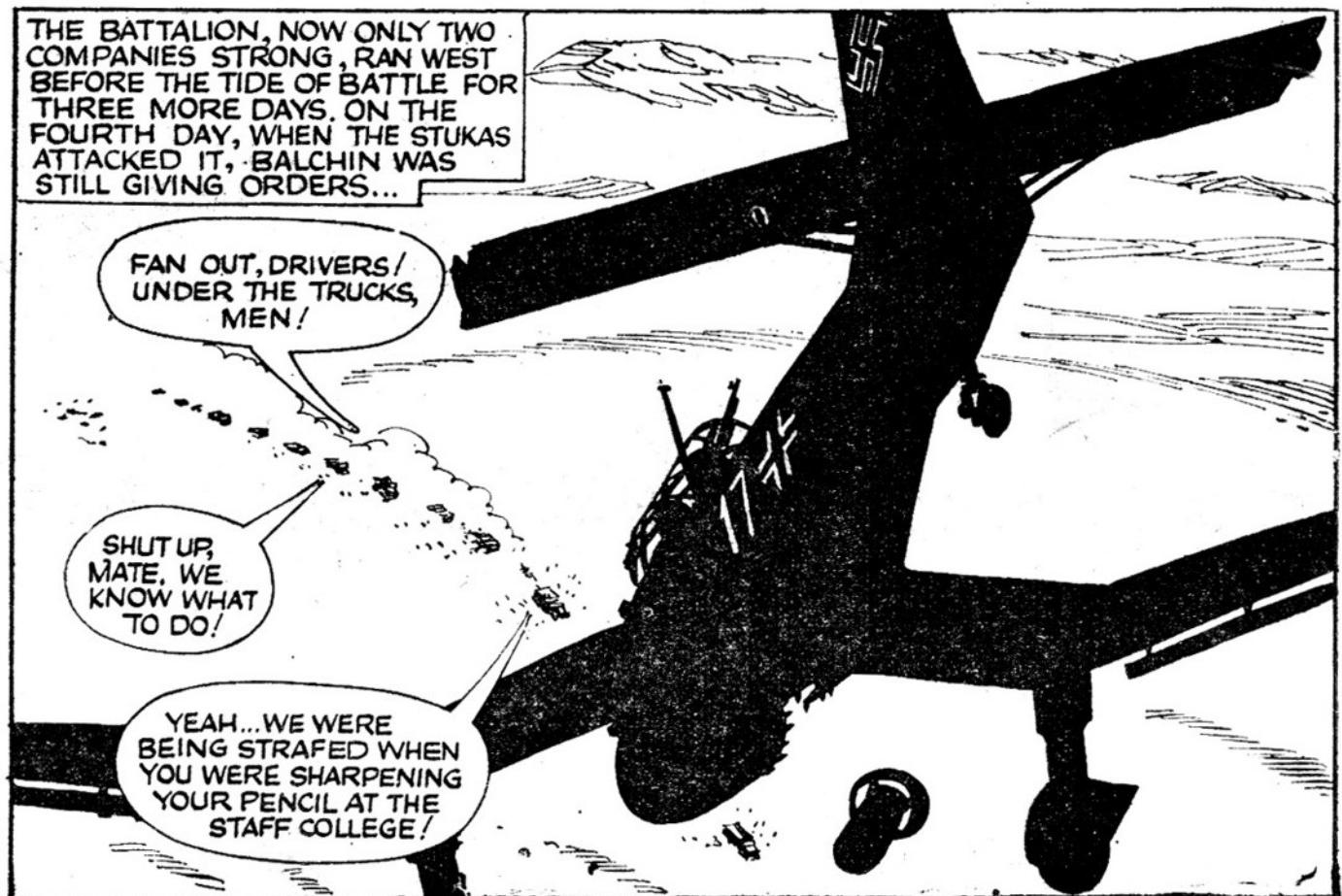


THE BATTALION, NOW ONLY TWO COMPANIES STRONG, RAN WEST BEFORE THE TIDE OF BATTLE FOR THREE MORE DAYS. ON THE FOURTH DAY, WHEN THE STUKAS ATTACKED IT, BALCHIN WAS STILL GIVING ORDERS...

FAN OUT, DRIVERS!
UNDER THE TRUCKS,
MEN!

SHUT UP,
MATE. WE
KNOW WHAT
TO DO!

YEAH...WE WERE
BEING STRAFED WHEN
YOU WERE SHARPENING
YOUR PENCIL AT THE
STAFF COLLEGE!



THE FOURTH SURVIVED THE STUKA ATTACK, BUT THEIR MOOD WAS TURNING UGLY, HEATED TO FLASH-POINT BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL BALCHIN'S ARROGANT ORDERS...

THE MAPS SHOW AN OLD ITALIAN MINEFIELD AROUND THIS AREA, SIR!

NONSENSE, CAPTAIN, DRIVE STRAIGHT ON!



THE MINEFIELD HAD PROBABLY BEEN SOWN BY THE ITALIANS YEARS BEFORE. BALCHIN'S STUBBORNNESS GAVE IT ITS FIRST VICTIMS THAT DAY IN 1942...

AAAGH!

MINES!
THE CAPTAIN
WAS RIGHT!





Hell's Heroes

41

WHEN THE JEEP ROLLED CLEAR OF THE MINEFIELD AND CAUGHT UP WITH THE MEN WHO HAD TRACKED THE PATH TO SAFETY, LIEUTENANT COLONEL BALCHIN BEGAN GIVING ORDERS AGAIN...

TEN MINUTES REST / AFTER THAT, BACK IN YOUR TRUCKS!

IT'LL TAKE US TEN MINUTES TO GET OUR DEAD AND WOUNDED OUT OF THAT MINEFIELD, DOOLEY!

I KNOW, MATES, BALCHIN'S GONE TOO FAR THIS TIME!

THERE WAS A NEW TONE IN THE MEN'S VOICES, HARSHER, MORE DANGEROUS. BALCHIN DID NOT NOTICE IT...

YOUR TEN MINUTES IS UP, MEN! SNAP TO IT! YOU, CORPORAL, GET THE MEN MOVING!

TO HELL WITH YOU, MATE... YOU AND YOUR TRUCKS AND YOUR ORDERS. ME AND MY COBBERS ARE STAYING HERE!

BALCHIN DREW HIMSELF UPRIGHT. HIS VOICE WAS LOUD, ARROGANT WITH ALL THE AUTHORITY THE ARMY HAD INVESTED IN HIM...

PERHAPS YOU DIDN'T HEAR ME CORRECTLY, CORPORAL? I TOLD YOU TO GET THE MEN ON TO THE TRUCKS!

I HEARD YOU, MATE. AND I TOLD YOU, WE'RE STAYING HERE. WE'RE FED UP TO THE TEETH WITH YOU, SEE?

Hell's Heroes

BUT THERE WAS AUTHORITY IN CORPORAL DOOLEY'S VOICE, TOO. IT WAS THE AUTHORITY OF MEN WHOSE FATHERS TAMED A WILD CONTINENT AND BRED ITS FREEDOM IN THEIR SONS...

THIS IS MUTINY!
YOU CAN'T DEFY
ME LIKE
THIS...



BRIGADIER DWYER STEPPED FROM THE JEEP.
HE WAS IN A HURRY...

I'VE GOT A VITAL MISSION
FOR THE FOURTH, BALCHIN.
GET YOUR MEN ON TO
THEIR TRUCKS...

ER...
YES
SIR!



LIEUTENANT COLONEL BALCHIN TURNED RIGIDLY ON HIS HEEL. HIS VOICE WAS HIGH AND TAUT...

YOU HEARD THE BRIGADIER, MEN!
I WANT YOU ON THOSE TRUCKS INSIDE TWENTY SECONDS!

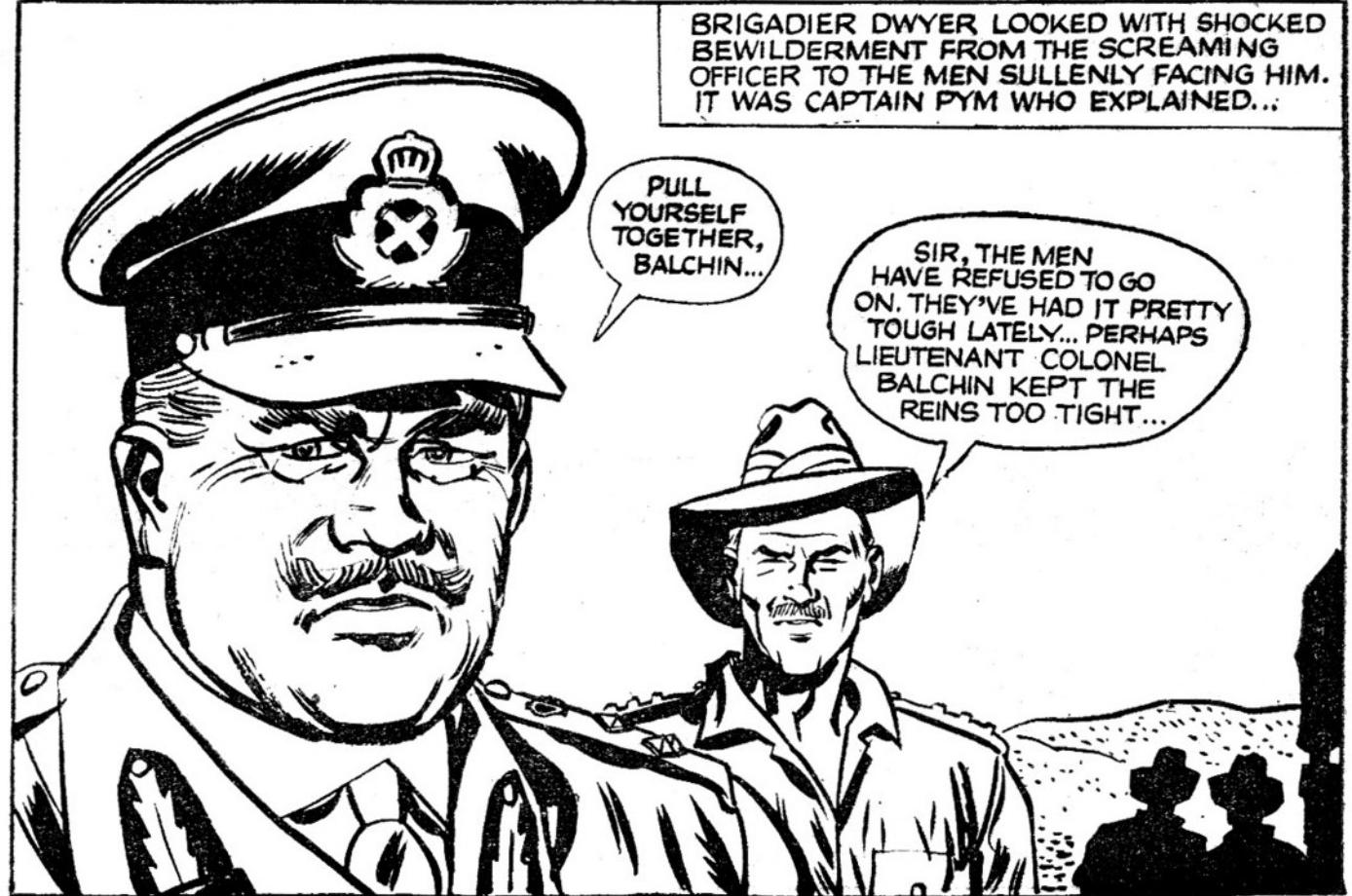


NONE OF THE AUSSIES MOVED. BALCHIN'S CONTROL FRAYED AND BROKE DOWN...

YOU'VE GOT TO MOVE - I'LL HAVE YOU SHOT, THE LOT OF YOU! MOVE, CURSE YOU - MOVE!



BRIGADIER DWYER LOOKED WITH SHOCKED BEWILDERMENT FROM THE SCREAMING OFFICER TO THE MEN SULLENLY FACING HIM. IT WAS CAPTAIN PYM WHO EXPLAINED...



Hell's Heroes

BRIGADIER DWYER WAS A DISCIPLINARIAN, BUT HE WAS ALSO AN EXPERIENCED SOLDIER. HE KNEW THAT THERE WERE MORE WAYS OF ACHIEVING AN OBJECTIVE THAN BY BRUTE FORCE ...

ALL RIGHT, CAPTAIN... WE'LL HAVE TO TRY ANOTHER WAY. YOU AND BALCHIN WILL COME BACK TO BRIGADE WITH ME!

RIGHT, SIR.
GORDON, YOU'LL STAY HERE WITH THE MEN!



THE JEEP SWUNG EASTWARDS AWAY FROM THE SILENT, SULLEN AUSTRALIANS. AN HOUR LATER, A HIGH ESCARPMENT ROSE AGAINST THE SKY TO THE NORTH. DWYER POINTED TO IT...

YOU SEE THAT HIGH GROUND, CAPTAIN? IT OVERLOOKS THE MAIN TRACK ON WHICH THE EIGHTH ARMY WILL BE HEADING FOR OUR NEW DEFENSIVE POSITIONS IN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS' TIME...



THE HIGH ESCARPMENT LAY EMPTY AND SILENT IN THE GLARE OF THE SUN.

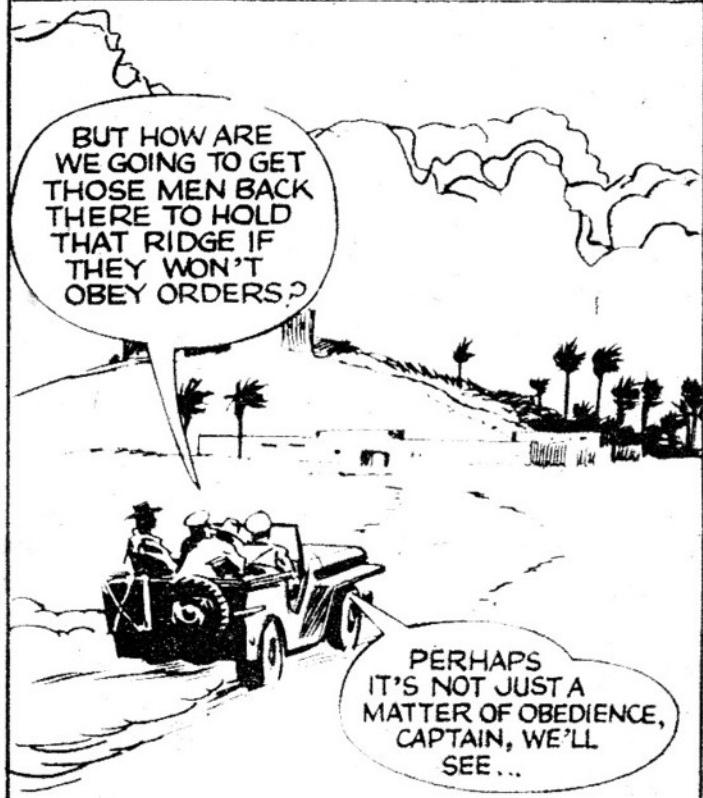
A SINGLE BATTERY OF JERRY EIGHTY-EIGHTS ON THAT ESCARPMENT COULD BOTTLE UP TWO-THIRDS OF OUR ARMY LONG ENOUGH FOR ROMMEL'S ARMOUR TO CATCH UP AND DESTROY IT...

SO YOU WANT THE FOURTH TO HOLD THAT HIGH GROUND TILL THE ARMY'S THROUGH. I SEE, SIR.

TWO HOURS HAD PASSED SINCE THEY HAD LEFT THE LEAGUE OF THE FOURTH. AT LAST THEY REACHED BRIGADE HEADQUARTERS...

BUT HOW ARE WE GOING TO GET THOSE MEN BACK THERE TO HOLD THAT RIDGE IF THEY WON'T OBEY ORDERS?

PERHAPS IT'S NOT JUST A MATTER OF OBEDIENCE, CAPTAIN, WE'LL SEE...



INSIDE THE COMPOUND, A PIONEER DETACHMENT WAS DIGGING A TRENCH ENERGETICALLY. THE BRIGADIER SPOKE TO A YOUNG STAFF OFFICER STANDING NEARBY...



Hell's Heroes





Chapter 4. The Salute

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, A COMMAND JEEP CARRYING PYM AND RUDGE LIT OUT INTO THE DESERT AND HEADED WEST TOWARDS MATRUH...



THEY SKIRTED THE ESCARPMENT AN HOUR LATER. THE CAPTAIN HAD ALREADY OUTLINED THE SITUATION TO RUDGE...



AND THAT'S
WHAT WE'LL DO, COBBER.
I KNOW HOW TO HANDLE
THOSE HORNY-HANDED,
ROUGHNECKED DIGGERS
OF MINE...

TEN MILES SOUTHWEST OF THE ESCARPMENT, THE JEEP SUDDENLY RAN INTO A GERMAN PICKET POSTED AMONG THE SAND DUNES...



Hell's Heroes

49

THE LIGHT MACHINE-GUN GOT IN A FIVE-SECOND BURST BEFORE RUDGE OPENED UP WITH HIS TOMMY-GUN. THE BIG MAN'S AIM WAS STEADIER THAN THE GERMANS'.



THE JEEP SLAMMED THROUGH THE GERMANS AT SIXTY MILES AN HOUR WITH RUDGE'S GUN HAMMERING. DROWSY WITH SLEEP, CONFUSED, THE GERMANS WERE TOO SLOW TO STOP IT...

WE'RE THROUGH...
BUT I RECKON I KNOW
WHERE THAT JERRY FORCE IS HEADED!

YES... THEY'RE GOING
TO OCCUPY THE ESCARPMENT.
WE'VE GOT TO GET THE
FOURTH MOVING...



Hell's Heroes

BUT THE MEN OF THE FOURTH WERE STILL SPRAWLED SULLENLY IN THE SHADE OF THE TRUCKS AN HOUR LATER, WHEN THE JEEP REACHED THEM...

HEY, DOOLEY...
MAYBE THE BRIG'S COMING BACK...

LET 'EM ALL COME...
THEY'RE NOT GIVING ANY ORDERS TO THE FOURTH FROM NOW ON.



THEY RECOGNISED THE BURLY FIGURE IN THE JEEP WHEN IT WAS THREE HUNDRED YARDS AWAY. THEY SCRAMBLED TO THEIR FEET, BUT THEY DID NOT RUN TO GREET HIM...

OKAY, MATES...
YOU CAN GET THE LEAD OUT OF YOUR BOOTS... I'M BACK...

IT'S RUDGE!

SO IT'S RUDGE.
THAT DON'T ALTER THINGS...



BITTERNESS HAD EATEN DEEP INTO THE AUSTRALIANS. RUDGE SAW THAT IN DOOLEY'S HARSH SCOWL AS HE WALKED FORWARD...

IF YOU'VE COME TO DO THE BRASSHAT'S DIRTY WORK FOR THEM, RUDGE, YOU'RE WASTING YOUR TIME. WE'RE NOT TAKING ANY MORE ORDERS!

I'VE BEEN HANDED A JOB TO DO, THAT'S ALL, DOOLEY. AND YOU LOT ARE GOING TO HELP ME...



WATCHING DOOLEY'S BITTER FACE AND THE SULLEN MOTIONLESS MEN BEHIND HIM, PYM THOUGHT THEN THAT RUDGE HAD FAILED...

HOW ARE YOU GOING TO MAKE US HELP YOU, RUDGE—SHOOT THE LOT OF US, LIKE THAT BLABBER-MOUTH BALCHIN SAID...

NO, COBBER. BUT YOU'RE GOING TO HELP ME, ALL THE SAME...



I DON'T NEED TO PULL RANK ON YOU, DOOLEY. I CAN LICK YOU OR ANY MAN IN THE FOURTH. PUT YOUR FISTS UP, MATE...

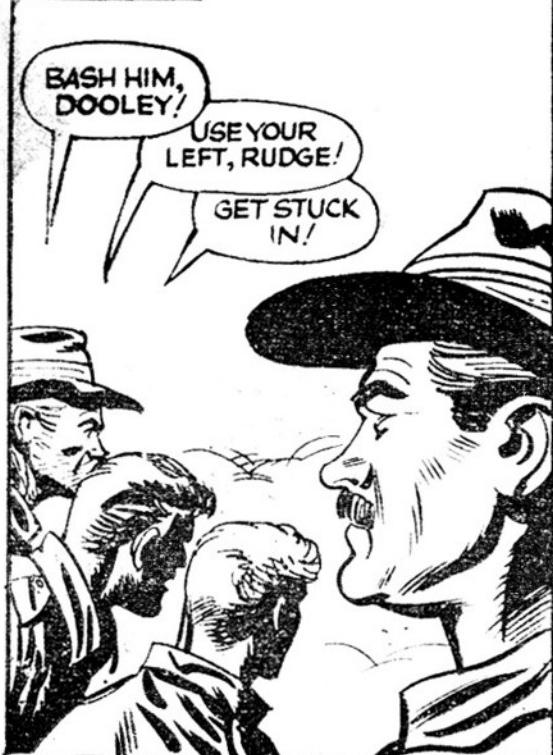
OKAY—YOU ASKED FOR IT!



ALL THE FRUSTRATION OF THE LAST NINE BITTER DAYS WAS IN THE FIST THAT DOOLEY SWUNG AT RUDGE THEN, IT KNOCKED RUDGE SPRAWLING...



PYM HEARD THAT YELL. HE HEARD THE ANGER IT RELEASED IN THOSE TOUGH AND TURBULENT MEN...AND HE KNEW THEN WHY RUDGE WAS FIGHTING...



IT WAS ACTION THOSE MEN NEEDED, AND RUDGE WAS GIVING IT TO THEM. ALSO, HE WAS CLAIMING HIS RIGHT TO LEAD THEM... THE ONLY WAY THEY RESPECTED, WITH HIS FISTS...





Hell's Heroes

AN HOUR LATER, THE GERMAN BATTLE GROUP DIGGING IN ON THE ESCARPMENT SAW THE CLOUD OF DUST APPROACHING FROM THE SOUTH...



THE FOURTH FORMED ITS SKIRMISH LINE UNDER GUNFIRE AT THE FOOT OF THE ESCARPMENT. THE MEN KNEW WHAT THEY HAD TO DO...



THE AUSTRALIANS WENT UP THE SLOPE DOGGEDLY INTO THE GERMAN CROSSFIRE FROM THE CREST. THERE WAS NO COVER. ALL THEY HAD WAS THEIR COURAGE AND THEIR GUNS AND THE BIG MAN TO LEAD THEM...

COME ON,
YOU
BLOKES!

KEEP IN
LINE WITH
RUDGE,
COBBERS!

THE MAIN ATTACK HAD BEEN PINNED DOWN BY THE SPANDAUS WHEN CAPTAIN PYM AND HIS COMPANY GAINED THE FLANK. PYM WASTED NO TIME...

RIGHT, MEN,
LET'S GO!

OKAY, MATE—
WE'RE ON
OUR WAY!

Hell's Heroes

THE SPANDAUS SWUNG ON PYM AND HIS COMPANY, BUT AT THAT MOMENT RUDGE SWEEPED HIS MAIN ATTACK FORWARD. THEIR AIM DIVIDED, THE GERMANS FALTERED...



FROM TWO SIDES, THE AUSTRALIANS FLOODED OVER THE GERMAN DEFENCES. THE FIGHT WAS HAND TO HAND NOW, AND NO MACHINE-GUNS COULD FEND OFF THE FOURTH...



BEFORE DARKNESS FELL THAT NIGHT, THE ESCARPMENT WAS IN THE HANDS OF COLONEL RUDGE AND THE TWO HUNDRED MEN WHO STILL REMAINED OF THE FOURTH BATTALION...



Hell's Heroes

57

AT FIRST LIGHT NEXT MORNING,
THE AUSTRALIANS SAW THE
EIGHTH ARMY TRANSPORT ON
THE ROAD TO THE NORTH,
HEADING EASTWARDS TO
EL ALAMEIN ...

THERE THEY GO,
COBBERS... AND WHILE
WE'RE UP HERE, THEY'LL
KEEP GOING...

HEY, RUDGE...
OVER THERE-
DUST CLOUDS!

THERE WAS NO NEED TO IDENTIFY THOSE
VEHICLES MAKING DUST TO THE SOUTH.
THE SHELLS BEGAN TO PLUNGE TOWARDS
THE AUSTRALIAN POSITIONS MINUTES
LATER...

JERRY'S GOING TO CHUCK
THE LOT AT US, BLOKES.
BUT WE'RE STAYING PUT
TILL OUR TRUCKS HAVE
STOPPED ROLLING ON
THE ROAD
BEHIND US.

Hell's Heroes



AFTER EVERY STRIKE, THE GERMAN INFANTRY LUNGED UPWARDS TOWARDS THE CREST. EACH TIME, THE AUSTRALIANS WERE THERE TO MEET THEM WITH BLAZING GUNS.

HOLD THEM, BLOKES!

YOU BET, RUDGE!



AT DUSK, LESS THAN A HUNDRED SURVIVORS CLUNG TO THE SAND OF THE ESCARPMENT. BUT THE TRUCKS AND THE GUNS WERE STILL ROLLING EASTWARDS ALONG THE ROAD TO EL ALAMEIN.



Hell's Heroes

THAT NIGHT, THE GERMANS BROUGHT UP HEAVIER ARTILLERY TO POUND THE AUSTRALIAN POSITION ON THE HIGH GROUND. THE FOURTH BATTALION HAD ALMOST CEASED TO EXIST NOW...



ALL THAT WAS LEFT WAS A HANDFUL OF ROUGH-TONGUED MEN WHO WOULD NOT BE PUSHED AROUND, AND THE BIG MAN WHO KNEW HOW TO HANDLE THEM...



AT DAWN, THE AUSTRALIANS WERE STILL ON THE ESCARPMENT, AND THE LAST OF THE EIGHTH ARMY'S TRANSPORT WAS HEADING SAFELY EASTWARD ALONG THE ROAD TO EL ALAMEIN.



TEN MINUTES LATER, TOO LATE, THE GERMANS THREW IN A FRESH ATTACK. AS THEY FLOODED ACROSS THE BROKEN CREST, THE AUSTRALIANS ROSE TO MEET THEM FOR THE LAST TIME ...



Hell's Heroes





THE GERMAN COMMANDER LOOKED AT LIEUTENANT COLONEL RUDGE. HE DID NOT KNOW THAT THE BIG MAN WAS A HARD CASE, TOUGH AND HORNY-HANDED. HE KNEW THAT IT WAS A BORN LEADER OF MEN HE SALUTED...



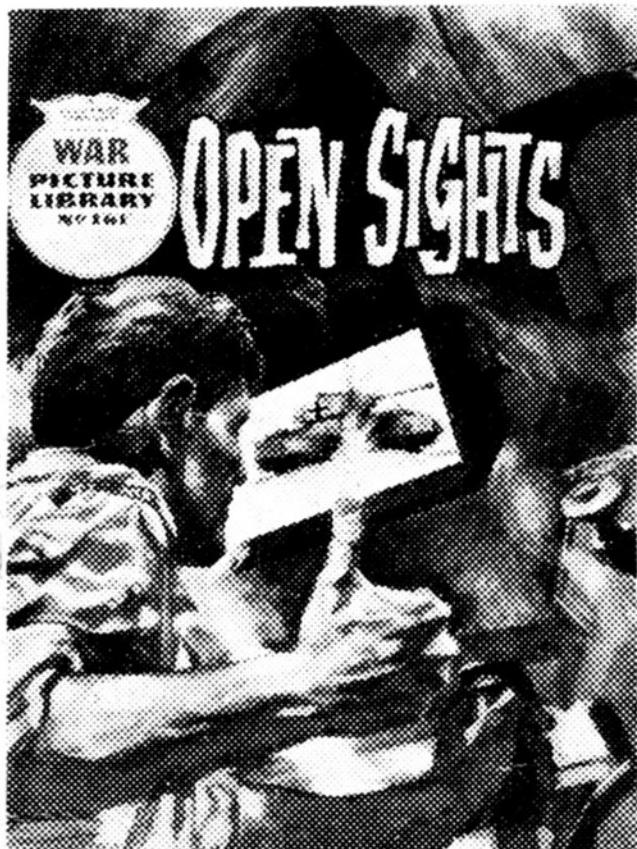
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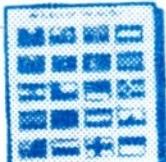
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